

Mindfulness for Student Mental Health in Schools

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Abstract

Studies have shown an increase in mental illness among school-aged children, and schools do not provide adequate programming to meet the emotional needs of children and youth. Mindfulness is defined as present moment thinking with individuals focused on the current task at hand instead of past experiences or future desires. Research on the benefits of mindfulness within therapeutic and medical settings has been prominent; however, little research has connected the health benefits of mindfulness for school-aged children. Evidence shows that mindfulness has tremendous benefits in regards to stress management, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, academic achievement, and overall emotional wellbeing. This paper addresses the growing need for mindfulness as a form of prevention and intervention within schools. It provides the background and benefits of mindfulness, meeting all 3 learning domains and building a positive classroom culture. It also highlights a variety of approaches to mental health including the newly created REAL model for classroom teachers.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Educators strive to provide student-centered wholistic programs that contribute to the development of the whole child, including emotional, social, and spiritual development. However, research has suggested that an emphasis has been placed on student cognitive development with the social and emotional aspects of development remaining a small part of education (Hyland, 2014).

Students experience various levels of stress in order to achieve academic excellence and postsecondary education. Standardized testing, assessment, and achievement charts show students their worth through academic value. Many classrooms are goal-oriented, which may be productive; however, this poses heavy stress creating a psychological burden for our students (Lu, 2012). Added stressors come with the increase in technology and the connectedness of our students with social media. Our students are continually linked through different online platforms and struggle to escape their peers' thoughts and opinions.

A reform is needed within education to meet the needs of our students and provide the support necessary to develop self-regulation skills and emotional resiliency, and enhance their personal self-concept. It would benefit children if educators created programs that are authentically wholistic.

Personal Background

This study is personally significant because of my experience with positive psychology and mindfulness as a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athlete in the United States. Sport can provide many uplifting experiences. However, it can also create times of doubt and defeat. As a softball player, I came to understand the

emotional turmoil of competitive sport. I was tested to perform at my highest level at every given moment. I was pushed to be better each and every day. Through these experiences, I became anxious, overwhelmed, and success oriented. The goal of achievement was always in the distance. As I pushed to achieve my goals by training every day, studying for long hours, practicing after practice, there was always another goal further on the horizon making achievement an impossibility and failure more prominent. Athletes tend to be driven by competition and actively seek the next challenge, making their thoughts and feelings future oriented and unsatisfied with daily successes.

This attitude was generated throughout my childhood from a constant desire to be the best, to achieve more, and to strive for success both on and off the playing field. I worked diligently at school to maintain the grades required to enter a university where I continued to strive for excellent grades to obtain academic scholarships. While playing softball, I pushed myself to be better in order to maintain my sports scholarship. My focus was constantly on the future. This gradually became a heavy burden.

During the final year of my university softball career, I built a new perspective about sport and the time I had left as a competitive athlete. I vowed to enjoy my final year with my teammates and playing the game I love. I turned to positive psychology and present moment thinking to achieve the mindset of *here* and *now* to focus on obtaining happiness in the present moment. Through mindfulness, my perspective shifted. I wish that I had obtained these skills earlier in life—in elementary and secondary schools—in order to better cope with anxiety. As an educator, I intend to introduce and maintain

mindfulness within my classroom and in my interactions to enable students to feel the power of positivity and the importance of present moment thinking and enjoyment.

Many children currently experience stress and anxiety as educators are pressured by assessment, by outcome, and by achievement. In order to be successful, they believe that they must achieve the end result—graduation. The focus has been largely narrowed to the cognitive domain with knowledge being the main focus of our curriculum. The affective domain (e.g., emotions, values, and feelings) is pushed to the side, or not mentioned at all. Students are left alone to deal with the emotional unrest similar to what I experienced. Without guidance, support, or emotional regulation skills, students struggle to maintain stride in this fast-paced, ever-changing society. With passion, I felt fully motivated to conduct this research to examine mindfulness in order to assist students to effectively maintain their mental health while in school.

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CHAPTER TWO: RESULTS

Globally, there has been a drastic increase in mental illness among young people and the rates of depression and anxiety are persistently on the rise (Broderick & Metz, 2009). Depression, which was previously associated with adults, has now become a predominant problem for younger and younger generations (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Approximately 10-20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness at some point in their life (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016). It is troubling to think that nearly 20% of youth will have experienced an episode of depression by the end of their grade 12 year (Seligman et al., 2009). It has been noted that depression is about 10 times more prevalent than it has been in the last 50 years (Seligman et al., 2009). Rates of anxiety disorder have also increased among children and young people (Broderick & Metz, 2009) making the need for mental health awareness within schools even greater. Individuals with adequate mental health can experience a small episode of anxiety and then return to their everyday activities. It is when these small episodes negatively affect individuals' everyday lives that it becomes a problem.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) uses the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (as cited in Thomson & Robertson, 2014, p. 2). This definition suggests a wholistic approach to health not focused solely on the physical wellbeing of the individual. However, research has shown that physical education and health education in Canada has been narrowly defined by the WHO definition with physical education classrooms emphasizing the skills need to

perform sports and physical fitness (Thomson & Robertson, 2014). One issue contributing to the disparity in focus is the integration of physical education with health education in the Provinces of Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, Canada (Lu & McLean, 2011; Thomson & Robertson, 2014). The integration poses a problem of possibly decreased instructional time for health education in comparison to physical education (Lu & McLean, 2011). This limited time is further reduced by the extent of subjects being covered in health education, with mental health being one subtopic. If education is believed to be wholistic and student-centered, health and wellness should be the responsibility of all teachers and not just that of the Physical Education teacher (Lu & Buchanan, 2014). The development of a health-promoting environment within schools is the concern of all parties: administrators, teachers, health providers, community members, parents, and students (Lu & McLean, 2011).

With the increase in mental illness and the commitment of educators to student wellbeing, an educational reform is necessary. Previous studies in mindfulness research have shown major improvements in mental health problems in adult populations (de Frias & Whyne, 2015; Galla, O'Reilly, Kitil, Smalley, & Black, 2015; Hjeltne et al., 2017; Lenze et al., 2014; Prakash, Whitmoyer, Aldao, & Schirda, 2017), but there has been little focus on children and youth. As noted above, the establishment of a healthier environment within schools is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the education system, and schools provide an ideal setting for promoting emotional learning and wellbeing (Lu & Buchanan, 2014). The education system should begin to prioritize not only academic learning but also emotional, social, and ethical competencies (Lu & Buchanan, 2014).

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to explore previous research associated with the terms “mindfulness,” “mental health,” “depression,” “stress,” “self regulation,” “youth,” and “children.” It has been organized to show the background of mindfulness and the various benefits associated with mindfulness. This section also compares previous literature that shows benefits in adult populations that may provide insight on the effects mindfulness may have on children and youth pending further research.

Background of Mindfulness

Mindfulness has become a growing practice in Western culture. Mindfulness can be defined as “being fully engaged in the present moment, manifesting a *here-and-now* oneness, and not indulging ourselves in contemplation of the past or future” (Lu, 2012, p. 38). Living mindfully is about being completely absorbed in the present moment and focused on the *process* not the *product* (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). To be mindful is to be in the reality of the moment, instead of focusing on the desires of tomorrow or the nostalgia or regrets of the past.

Traditionally, “mindfulness is related to Buddhism’s goal to alleviate unhappiness” (Lu et al., 2009, p. 357). Often, our desires are the root cause of our distress. The need for perfection, the want of something more, or the need for anything whatsoever has contributed to a fight within us (Lu et al., 2009). These desires are what drive our behaviour and often lead to unhappiness. For school students, this can have a negative impact on overall health and wellbeing. The key to freeing ourselves from such desires, according to Buddhism, is mindfulness (Lu et al., 2009). While mindfulness helps improve self-efficacy and emotional regulation, it is probable that mindfulness

contributes to a more blissful state, and in turn could lead to overall emotional happiness.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Research with adults has shown that mindfulness can “increase awareness of moment-to-moment experience and promote reflection, self-regulation, empathy, and caring for others” (Schonert-Reichl et al. 2015, p. 2). It can benefit in alleviating pain, reducing depression and anxiety (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt, & Miller, 2015), stress, and its underlying physiology (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). It has been argued that mindfulness as a form of prevention reaps a double benefit: reducing problems and promoting positive behaviours (Broderick & Metz, 2009). It also has been shown to be effective in the treatment of depression, addictions, and the promotion of physical health, mental health, and general wellbeing (Hyland, 2014). In short, “A moment of mindfulness can help free one from false, often crippling, beliefs about oneself and others, beliefs which impact one’s mental and physical health” (Lu et al. 2009, p. 360). Mindfulness practices can deter thoughts away from one’s negative beliefs to enhance awareness of their effect on mood and state of mind. The awareness of oneself can be an important step to building positive mental health (Rybak, 2013). Earlier research has shown that mindfulness can serve to reduce stress, regulate emotions, improve self-efficacy, increase academic achievement, and contribute to a higher quality of life (Rybak, 2013).

Stress Management

Recent studies have shown that mindfulness can be beneficial to students’ ability to manage stressful situations (Felton, Coates, & Christopher, 2015; Hassed, 2016; Tan & Martin, 2015). Mindful practices can positively impact mental and physical health, as

stressors are lessened and overall wellbeing improved (Rybak, 2013). Wisner and Starzec (2015) suggest that individuals using mindfulness are able to successfully manage their anger and stress, as well as develop trust and support. The benefits of mindfulness are not separate entities. With students' ability to manage stress, they open themselves emotionally to positive relationships with others.

Emotional Regulation

Stress management is closely related to emotional regulation. Individuals who allow stress to encompass their minds let their emotions fluctuate with it. Emotional regulation can be defined as “the ability to recognize and manage emotions adaptively” (Broderick & Metz, 2009, p. 36). It has been noted that practicing mindfulness can build emotional regulation skills and foster present moment thinking (Hyland, 2011; Lu & Buchanan, 2014; Robinson & Berezowski, 2016). Research suggests a link between mindfulness and emotional regulation with an emphasis on the reduced reactivity of individuals to stressful or emotional experiences (Fogarty et al., 2015).

In addition to reduced reactivity, research supports the link between mindfulness and increased self-regulation, specifically emotional regulation (Fogarty et al., 2015). A pilot mindfulness curriculum titled “Learning to BREATHE” was implemented in a private high school, where results showed that individuals reported a greater awareness of their feelings as they were being experienced (Broderick & Metz, 2009). This led to an increase in emotional regulation skills following the completion of the program (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Greenberg & Harris, 2012). A similar study conducted by Milligan et al. (2016) suggests that mindfulness practices help individuals be present with stress and to not engage in automatic behaviours of fight or flight. As the individuals are focused on present

moment awareness, they are more likely to experience reduced arousal during emotional disturbances and increased ability to avoid reactive behaviour (Fogarty et al., 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Parker, Kupersmidt, Mathis, Scull, & Sims, 2014). Therefore, through mindfulness practices, students are able to identify emotional experiences and construct appropriate emotional responses during their everyday experiences.

Self-Efficacy

The lack of confidence in students' abilities can negatively affect their approach to tasks, goals, and challenges. Emotional regulation through mindfulness can aid in the awareness of negative thoughts associated with self-concept and begin to build self-efficacy throughout their academic pursuits and their everyday lives. Research has shown a prominent link between mindfulness and increased self-efficacy (Lu, 2012; Robinson & Berezowski, 2016; Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014). Hassed (2016) notes that self-compassion has been associated with greater belief that a personal weakness can be changed for the better; increased motivation to change a weakness; less personal stress; and greater forgiveness and increased empathy and compassion for humanity. Mindfulness can offer students a sense of self-efficacy and an overall enriched life (Wisner & Starzec, 2015). Students are provided with a venue to express and increase their self-efficacy during mindfulness and develop lifelong coping skills.

Academic Achievement

Mindfulness through stress management, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy helps improve academic achievement. A variety of studies have shown the positive correlation between mindfulness and academic achievement (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Robinson & Berezowski, 2016; Zoogman et al., 2015). Hyland (2014) suggests wholism by

stating that including mindfulness in education can also provide a foundation for more general cognitive development and increased self-esteem and emotional control can aid in creating a positive mindset for other academic tasks. Mindfulness “supports qualities of attention, reflection, and motivation that make learning effective” (Broderick & Metz, 2009, p. 36). Broderick and Metz (2009) further associate mindfulness with mental health: “When students suffer from mental health problems related to stress, violence, depression, eating disorders, or drug abuse, the quality of their educational experience is diminished, no matter how skilled the teacher or how well-developed the curriculum” (p. 36). Allowing students to participate in mindfulness moments can increase their attention and improve their academic performance as well as their overall quality of life (Hassed, 2016; Tan & Martin, 2015). This includes improve student retention of information conveyed during lecture (Hassed, 2016; Robinson & Berezowski, 2016). Therefore, studies show that mindfulness has had a positive impact on academic performance through increased attention allowing for improved retention of information.

Although there has been adequate research in the benefits of mindfulness in adult populations, little research has been conducted to support mindfulness for mental health in children and youth. As a necessary therapeutic tool, mindfulness has been proven effective in adult populations within both clinical and non-clinical settings. Nonetheless, the benefits associated with adults lay the foundation for our understanding of mindfulness within children.

Theoretical Framework of the Study: The Power of Positivity

With the increase in depressive episodes among children, it is important to note the shift in psychology and the power in positivity. This type of outlook can shape the

entire day, week, and beyond, as it has the potential for a lifelong shaping of children's attitudes. "For years, psychology has focused on repairing damage and curing mental illness rather than helping people develop the strengths and capacities necessary to thrive" (Carruthers & Hood, 2004, p. 225). Positive psychology emphasizes wellbeing through prevention for all individuals, rather than rehabilitation. Each and every individual can benefit from the power of positivity.

Mindfulness is linked to positive psychology in that it is not intended to diminish negative aspects but to intentionally create self-awareness and appreciation of life itself (Carruthers & Hood, 2011). It is a wholistic approach that focuses on the strength and development of the individual and encourages all people to live mindfully.

Strategies to Implement Mindfulness for Student Mental Health in Schools

The following strategies are proposed to assist teachers and other school personnel to implement mindfulness for student mental health. The suggestions are based upon the academic literature, teachers' experiences, and discussions with professionals in the fields of public health, health education, and physical education.

Developing Positive Educational Culture in Schools

It is critical to integrate mindfulness into school curriculum to create the foundation of positive education culture in schools. In Ontario, Canada's largest province, mindfulness has been addressed in the health and physical education curriculum as one of the important personal skills under the strand of living skills that need to be taught in three other strands (i.e., healthy living, active living, and movement competence). *Personal skills* is a section dedicated to the development of the child mentally and emotionally (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). It is intended to provide

students with the tools needed to face life's challenges and persevere. Similar to the benefits of mindfulness, the personal skills section of the curriculum is striving to provide students with management skills, self-regulation skills, and increased self-efficacy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Ontario's curriculum document specifically suggests "cultivating a positive disposition, practising mindfulness, having a forward-thinking outlook, and seeking help when needed" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 25). Mindfulness, although mentioned as a single element in this document, can be applied to many aspects of personal development and mental wellbeing. With the desire of mindfulness to create an inner peace and self-efficacy and the ability to cope with stressful situations, it appears that mindfulness is an effective strategy to meet the needs of the curriculum and, in turn, the wellbeing of the students.

With the increase in adolescent mental illness and the increased association with mindfulness positively impacting mental health, it is suggested that mindfulness practices would benefit students in their emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. "Even a small measure of mindfulness can achieve dramatic results" (Lu et al., 2009, p. 360). Therefore, it is desirable to implement mindfulness practices within the classroom setting.

Education has shifted to embrace a more wholistic approach and incorporated positive psychology to developing students' strengths and capacities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). This fosters an excellent venue for mindfulness practice and promotes overall student wellbeing. Positive psychology, also known as psychology of strengths, focuses on the development of capacities needed to thrive (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). Evidently, these capacities are the same strengths that defend against stress and prevent mental and physical illnesses (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). As mindfulness is a tool used

to create present moment thinking, positive psychology and mindfulness begin to complement each other. When defining mental health, many assume the absence of illness; however, the absence of negative aspects does not necessarily result in an increase of positive assets (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). Positivity about oneself and life must be intentionally cultivated to create a more wholistic health and wellbeing (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). The increase in mindfulness practices within school can aid in the praise of positive attributes about oneself and about life. Efforts must focus upon building students' wellness instead of diminishing the struggles they face on a daily basis.

Addressing All Three Domains of a Whole Child

Within education, teachers strive to address three specific domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective (Hyland, 2014). Each of these domains characterizes a different aspect of student development. The cognitive domain focuses on knowledge, comprehension, and evaluation. This domain is the centre of most classrooms. The psychomotor domain consists of body movements, coordination, and speech behaviours and serves as the focus of physical education. A third domain is the affective domain, which consists of behaviours and objectives that contain an emotional association such as attitudes, values, and beliefs (Hyland, 2014). This domain contributes to the child's social and interpersonal relationships. The affect is the association of emotions, attitudes, and beliefs relating to mental health. According to Ontario's Health and Physical Education curriculum, all teachers are expected to meet these three interrelated domains within every classroom lesson (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). However, often times this is not the case and the cognitive domain remains the prominent focus.

Although all teachers are responsible for addressing these three domains, it is unfortunate that the affective domain has been greatly overlooked in many situations. As the role of schools has made preparation for the working world a top priority (Hyland, 2014), the emphasis has been on the cognitive development of the student and minimal development of the affective domain. “It is argued that mindfulness practice has much to contribute to the neglected area of affective education” (Hyland, 2014, p. 277). Through mindfulness, students develop the skills required for the working world, to control their emotions and learn to cope during unfortunate situations. Educators should and can help promote a healthy and productive society by maximizing opportunities to provide students early in life with the tools to maintain strong emotional health (Lu & Buchanan, 2014). Mindfulness is a skill that can be taught within schools and can contribute to strong emotional health, thus meeting the needs of students’ affective development.

Taking a Variety of Approaches to Mental Health

Practising mindfulness within everyday life and in the school setting can be an effective way of decreasing the mental illness and its early onset. Stressful situations can lead to anxiety for children and youth. One prominent symptom associated with anxiety is short choppy breaths (Robinson & Berezowski, 2016). The use of mindful breathing can be beneficial in decreasing the onset of anxiety and increase students’ ability to maintain controlled breathing, and lower heart rate (Robinson & Berezowski, 2016). This is a skill that can be used throughout life. All students can benefit from a classroom-based mindfulness intervention (Weijer-Bergsma, Langenberg, Brandsma, Oort, & Bögels, 2014). Emotional wellbeing within schools is important for all areas of success because

emotional wellbeing is integrated within all aspects of the student's school experience (Lu & Buchanan, 2014).

If students are not in the proper mindset to complete their schoolwork, they will not be able to complete it to the best of their ability. In contrast, with a positive mindset, living in the present moment and free from judgment, students are able to focus on the task at hand and complete their work with ease. Often, mindfulness practice simply means being aware of the present moment. This can be conducted along with everyday activities such as eating, washing the dishes, walking, or solving problems (Hyland, 2014). For the target age group of younger children, a variety of adaptive activities might include nature-related activities, relaxation techniques, guided imagery, and forms of meditation (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). More formal mindfulness practices that can be implemented within physical education are Eastern Movement Disciplines (EDMs) (Lu, 2012; Lu et al., 2009). Some specific EDMs include Eastern Martial Arts (e.g., Tai Ji Quan, judo) and meditation (e.g., Qi Gong, Yoga). EDMs are effective in bringing students into the present moment because of a variety of breathing techniques associated with the movement (Lu et al., 2009).

Mindfulness has been strongly associated with meditation. Yet, mindfulness is not simply characterized solely by breathing. According to Hyland (2011), there are seven characteristics associated with mindfulness: non-judgment, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go.

1. Non-judgmental thinking suggests that the individual decentralizes oneself from her or his experience to become an outer witness (Hyland, 2011). As we become aware of our thoughts and experiences, it becomes apparent that these processes are

automatically labeled and processed to be either good or bad (Hyland, 2011).

Mindfulness challenges individuals to simply be with the process of thinking itself (Hyland, 2011).

2. Hyland (2011) describes patience as “the wisdom not to strive or worry too much about external ends or goals” (p. 31). This suggests that through mindfulness, individuals gain the skills to be patient and enjoy the present moment. Often our eager minds create stress and anxiety. Remaining patient can help the mind remain calm and enjoy the present moment.
3. The third characteristic is to embrace the beginner’s mind. Individuals are asked to not indulge in the past (Hyland, 2011) but rather, see it for the very first time. Negative past experiences can taint the outlook of future experiences that are related. For example, someone enjoying an apple under a tree may find this to be a pleasant and relaxing experience, whereas another individual enjoying an apple under a tree may find herself sitting on top of an anthill, thus creating an unpleasant experience. These two experiences can hinder future experiences with the tree or the outdoors in general. Having a beginner’s mind allows individuals to experience each moment and not be influenced by past experiences.
4. Trust is in the importance of our thoughts and values (Hyland, 2011). This allows us to be able to trust our “authentic vision of the world” (Hyland, 2011, p. 31).
5. Non-striving suggests that mindfulness is simply paying attention; it does not strive for any other goal but attention itself (Hyland, 2011).
6. Acceptance is the “willingness to see things as they are, not as we would like them to be” (Hyland, 2011, p. 31). When observing our thoughts and desires, one

does not become engaged or persuaded by them but are simply aware of their presence (Lu et al., 2009).

7. Through the final characteristic of “letting go,” individuals allow themselves to experience their thoughts as they come and go without the desire to hold on to anything (Hyland, 2011). This is one of the most difficult aspects of mindfulness—the ability to not dwell on the past or hold onto plans for the future.

These characteristics help in defining the goals of an educational mindfulness program. Through patience, beginner’s mind, and letting go, those coping with mental illness can learn adequate strategies to release their negative thoughts and prevent future episodes. Also, these strategies act as prevention as well by teaching students the skills needed to cope with emotional turmoil and suffering.

REAL Model: A New Strategy for Mental Health

In accordance with the aforementioned seven characteristics of mindfulness and supported by my review of the literature, I have compiled my understanding of mindfulness into a model to assist classroom teachers with implementation (see Figure 2-1). This model will help students to focus on four simple steps to achieve mindfulness. These steps are described by the acronym REAL, which is a model to follow when encountering difficult situations. The word *REAL* is used as the acronym to encourage students to focus on the present (not the past or future), which encompasses reality. REAL represents *Recognize*, *Experience*, *Accept*, and *Let go*. These four steps incorporate the key characteristics of mindfulness and can be readily implemented within any classroom and everyday life.

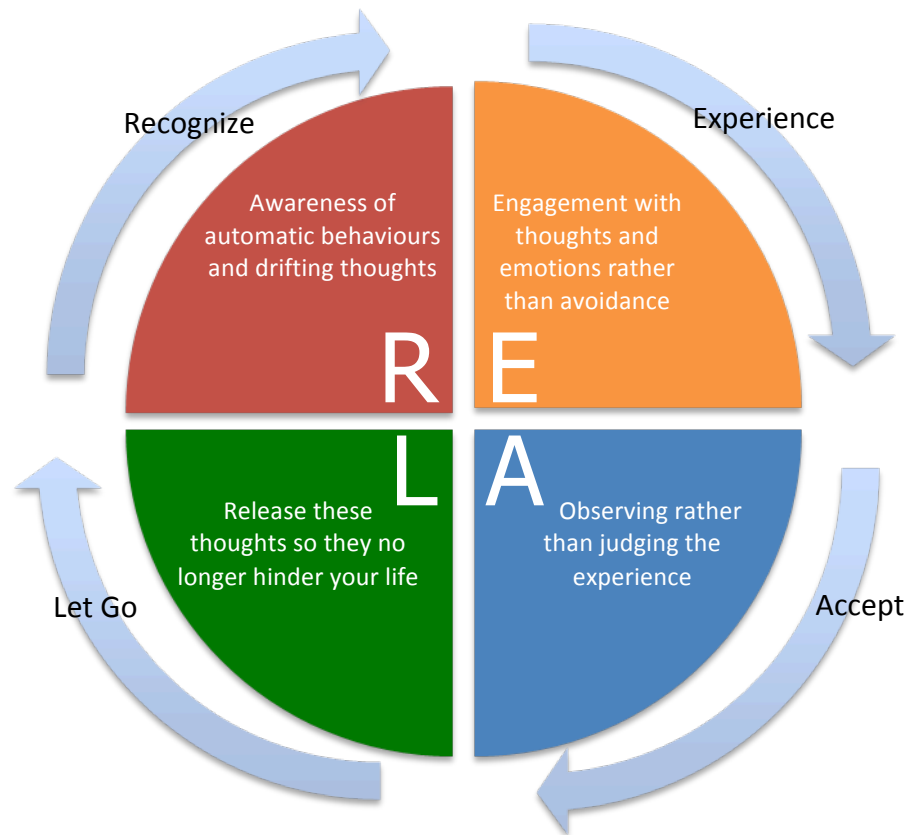


Figure 2-1. REAL model.

Recognize. The term *recognize* suggests awareness for an array of thoughts and emotions that enter the mind. The brain allows many functions to occur at once and mindless behaviour follows routine actions (Langer, 1989). These automatic behaviours occur when individuals continually perform a repetitive task. Children in particular fall easily into automatic behaviours (Langer, 1989). They are expected to do as they are told without question or thought. For example, they sit down at dinner to eat the meal placed in front of them without question. In school, students may not realize that their attention has wandered to other stimuli (e.g., the snow falling outside leading to thoughts of sledding or snowmen, stressful feeling of the next day's exam, or even the worry of what a peer said in the hallway). Integrating mindfulness into daily activities allows students to recognize that their minds have drifted and allows them to bring themselves back to the present moment. Therefore, the term *recognize* in the REAL model is the beginning of our mindfulness progression.

Experience. The term *experience* goes beyond recognition and allows the individual to indulge in the thoughts and emotions of the present moment. It is important for the individual to remember that these thoughts and emotions are not a reflection of the self (Hyland, 2011). In fact, we return to our concept of *real*, recognizing that these thoughts do not reflect reality. Educators should encourage students to experience instead of avoiding emotions, as avoidance can lead to further emotional distress. To extend the previous example, the student has allowed his peer's words to infect his mind and prevent him from moving forward. At this stage of mindfulness, the student must experience the thoughts that are entering his or her mind instead of pushing them away. This step allows the individual to take in these emotions as they come and pass so that they may move

onto the last two steps of our *REAL* model.

Accept. The third step works in concert with experience, in which the individual is experiencing the emotion and accepting it as it is without desires of the past or becoming anxious for the future. Accepting comes with observation. Individuals observe their thoughts and emotions without judgment, which refers to a *mirror-thought* (Lu, 2012); an observation instead of an interpretation of whatever is in front of us. Again, with the previous example in mind, the student has experienced the thoughts that have entered his or her mind. In this stage of mindfulness, the student is to accept these thoughts as they are without judgment or assessment. Individuals accept that both positive and negative thoughts will occur but are not a reflection of their personal self-concept. Instead, their feelings of these experiences are non-judgmental but accepting prior to releasing them from our mind.

Let go. The final step is to *let go*, which infers that thoughts and emotions are released so they do not hinder or affect the students' life any further. As their lives flourish and they gain many positive and negative experiences, they begin to categorize them in their minds. For example, a man was sitting under a tree pleasantly eating his apple on a warm summer day when he began to feel bites all along his legs. He was sitting in a pile of carpenter ants. After this negative experience, he vowed to never sit under a tree again. In doing so, this man allowed his negative experiences to shape his future. Individuals must learn to let go of past experiences and focus on the present. It is also important to note that the past is unchangeable and the present is within grasp. This is a difficult step but can be strengthened with practice and understanding of the importance of emotional wellbeing.

These four steps can help students to cope with negative thoughts and feelings that often occur. We must recognize them, experience them, accept them, and then let them go. In mindfulness, individuals may need to continually bring their attention back to their current thoughts, emotions, and body sensations (Zoogman et al., 2015). This continual attention becomes a learned skill that can be easily accessible during difficult situations. Within primary school age groups, mindfulness can be described as a muscle within the brain. When we are able to apply the REAL model and release our negative thoughts, we toughen our mindfulness muscle and increasingly become mentally strong (Carruthers & Hood, 2011). With sustained practice, individuals strengthen their abilities and subsequently begin to create an instinctive response to stressful situations (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). This allows them to continue to use the skills gained in order to better their mental health and overall wellbeing.

Setting the Scene for Mindfulness

It is important for teachers to create a classroom culture with mindfulness as it fosters an environment that values personal growth and ethics (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). Much of this practice helps to create a worldview that includes diverse social and moral values (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). In addition to the REAL model, a series of strategies for implementation of mindfulness at schools can benefit classroom teachers in effective implementation. These strategies start with the staff members, who should act as positive role models with a personal connection to mindfulness (Hassed, 2016). Workshops and personal study will allow school staff to become familiar with mindfulness and its implementation. As the teachers become comfortable with being mindful, they can then begin formal teaching of mindfulness (Hassed, 2016). This can

be done a few times a day and a few minutes each time throughout the day (either at the beginning or the end of a lesson) (Hassed, 2016). In order to hold student interest and maintain relevancy, it is better to conceptualize and integrate mindfulness within the curriculum (Hassed, 2016). During the day, staff should remind students of the characteristics of mindfulness such as patience, letting go, acceptance, and awareness (Hassed, 2016).

In addition to these guidelines and the REAL model, there are a number of resources available for the classroom. The *MindUp Curriculum* by the Hawthorn Foundation (2011) provides a variety of lessons categorized by school grade level. There is also a range of Applications available for Android and IOS tablets that can benefit mindful practice such as Smiling Mind, Headspace, and Calm. With the growing concern for mental health and the popularity of mindfulness, many medical centres are providing mindfulness workshops to aid in educating community members. School staff may consult local medical organizations to increase student engagement and create a positive environment using mindfulness for student mental health.

With the increase in mental illness among school-age children, the demand for affective education is essential. There has been a growing urge for student emotional development. Mindfulness has been shown to improve mental health within adult populations suffering from mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. These findings suggest the benefits of mindfulness may be transferrable to students suffering from similar mental illness. Mindfulness will serve not only as an intervention for students suffering with mental illness but also as prevention for all students to gain the life skill of being mindful on a daily basis. The present study shows that mindfulness can

have benefits on stress management, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement.

Implications for Practice

There has been an increased sense of awareness surrounding mental health and its associated stigma. Educators are looking to increase their knowledge and skills to better teach in the affective domain. Through the lens of positive psychology, mindfulness has shown to be an effective approach. The findings outlined within this research suggest the importance of the affective domain and suggest a variety of mindfulness practices that can be implemented to help decrease student mental illness and increase prevention of further mental health problems in schools. This study challenges educators to think critically about their practice and the emphasis on emotional wellbeing throughout their daily routine.

Implications for Further Research

From these findings, it is evident that further research is needed. Questions remain about the effectiveness of mindfulness with child and youth populations. Research should be conducted to confirm the benefits of mindfulness with school-age children. Extending this could be a variety of other factors that can create a more in-depth examination of mindfulness on specific children and youth populations, such as students with disabilities, students with behavioural issues, and students living in low socio-economic communities.

Final Word

Through mindfulness practices, students can better understand their emotions and build emotional regulation skills when confronted with negative thoughts and beliefs. They are able to live in the present moment in appreciation for all that they have. The

implementation of mindfulness in schools can aid in promoting a wholistic, student-centered approach to education and decrease the rate of depression and anxiety in school-aged children. Specifically, mindfulness has shown benefits in stress management, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. A variety of resources are currently available to teachers with the growing emphasis on mindfulness for student mental health. Increased awareness of mindfulness practices has advanced the discussion of effective application within schools but further research is needed.

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CHAPTER THREE: PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Through the journey of conducting this research, I came to find my true self. I began this journey focusing on student wellbeing but soon realized that this experience provided me with a new outlook on my own life. As I started to implement mindfulness into my life, I found joy and happiness in daily activities. There were some difficulties along the way but my practice allowed me to accept these struggles and move forward to new experiences. I have consulted a variety of professionals and researchers to confirm and further my knowledge on mindfulness, and I will continue to explore new research in this field for my own personal and professional life. At the end of this project, I feel hope that others can find meaning and appreciation for the present moment and begin to share it with others.

Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that many students have not received adequate support when it comes to mental health and wellness. However, a shift in education has shown an increase in teacher awareness and intervention of student mental health. Many studies are showing the positive effects of mindfulness on mental health, forcing curriculum developers to see its significance. It is encouraging to note that many school boards have started to create a new focus on mindfulness in the curriculum to aid in the transformation of school mental health and wellness.

In my personal experience with the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) in Hamilton, Ontario, administrators are encouraging teachers to follow the *MindUp Curriculum*, which The Hawn Foundation (2011), a collection of leading researchers, neuroscientists, behavioural psychologists, and educators, created to provide

simple strategies for students to remain focused, build resiliency, and increase their self-regulation. The MindUP program comprises three different books based on grade level (K-2, 3-5, 6-8). Each book provides the teacher with 15 lessons introducing the brain and how our thoughts and emotions create a change in our health and wellbeing (The Hawm Foundation, 2011). These books can be purchased through Scholastic and have already been integrated into HWDSB and Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB).

Personally, I have conducted quite a few lessons from the *MindUp 3-5* book with much success. The students enjoy the connection to their brains and the different strategies they can apply to their daily lives. With consistency, this program can be highly effective in increasing student mental health and wellbeing.

In addition to the *MindUp Curriculum*, some school boards have begun to provide professional development for teachers to increase their knowledge and awareness of mental health issues in school. During my research, I began to attend many professional development opportunities provided by the HWDSB. As a result, I am now certified by the Canadian Mental Health Association as a Mental Health First Aider alongside many other teachers within the board. I have also attended a 2-day certification for Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST). This seminar provides teachers with the necessary strategies to recognize personal distress and provide support to those in need. Development has even gone further to provide teachers with a day-long seminar on Mindful Communities. This seminar provides teachers with an introduction to mindfulness and strategies to create a sense of belonging in the classroom with positive strategies for building self-regulation and resiliency.

Mindfulness resources are becoming more prevalent within school systems.

Policy makers, curriculum developers, and administrators are beginning to put emphasis on mental health in schools. This is a positive shift in developing a wholistic student-centered approach to education. Instead of the focus being primarily on the cognitive domain, educators are beginning to appreciate the importance of the affective and psychomotor domains of education and how mindfulness can benefit in all domains.

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